

A
Stone's Throw
Removed

*Christmas
Greetings*

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A SERMON PREACHED BY
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A STONE'S THROW REMOVED

Texts: Matthew 26:38. Luke 22:41.



HAVE YOU ever been struck by the seeming incongruity of two verses that occur very close together in the 6th chapter of Galatians?—"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ," and "Every man must bear his own burden." How can we reconcile these two apparently conflicting injunctions? If I bear my **own** burden, how can others bear it for me? And if I attempt to bear the burden of another, and so fulfil Christ's law, am I not making it impossible for that man to bear his own?

I wonder if the answer is not to be found in the story of Gethsemane, and particularly in these two verses?—"Then saith He unto them, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; tarry ye here and watch with me.'" (Matthew 26:38). And again: "He was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast." (Luke 22:41).

The last bitter test was at hand. As early as the temptation in the wilderness, the dark shadow of the cross had lain athwart Jesus' path. As the enmity against him gathered strength, he had warned the disciples that he must go up to Jerusalem, and suffer many things, and be killed. In the last intimate moments around the table in the Upper Room, he had spoken of his death, and had linked his passion with the love of God, and the redemption of man.

*"When ye have seen me, ye have seen
the Father."*

"This is my body, which is broken for you."

Now he must go out, and in the Garden, bring himself to **an acceptance** of the tragedy that was about to unfold, so that it should be, not a potion that was thrust down his throat, but a cup that he should take from the Father's hand—yes, even reach out for—and willingly drink. They descend from the Upper Room, but when they come to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus takes the three who have been closest to him, and advances toward the spot of his supreme agony.

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I

The first thing to note is, that Jesus wanted the presence and support of his friends. "Tarry ye here, and watch with me." Earthly friends can go a long way with us into the garden of sorrow, and it is a tremendous lift to know that in a time of trouble, understanding hearts are watching and praying. It is one of the priceless privileges of friendship to be thus "standing by." Oscar Wilde used to say that if a friend of his gave a party, and did not invite him, he would not mind a bit. But if that friend had a sorrow, and did not permit him to share it, if the doors of the house of mourning were shut against him, he would feel it as a most poignant humiliation. The greatest compliment that a friend can pay you is to include you **in**, on his sorrow, anxiety or pain.

A lady once said to an old negress:

"I am sorry to hear about Lindy Robison's

death. You must miss her very much—you were such friends.”

“Yes, Mum, I’se sorry she is daid too, but we were not **friends**.”

“Why, I thought you were. I have often seen you laughing and talking together.”

“Oh, yes Mum, we is laughed and joked together, but we is jest ’quaintances: You see, Mum, we never shed no tears together. Folks has got to cry together befo’ dey is friends.”

Count it as an honor then, when men turn to you in trouble; and, if you would bear the name of friend, be ready to mingle your tears with others. Be alert for signals of distress. Be sympathetic. Cultivate an understanding heart.

There are lonely people carrying burdens that you can help to bear. Dr. William Stidger, of radio fame, tells about going into a grocery store one day during the war. One of the clerks, a middle-aged man, was particularly solicitous. He followed Dr. Stidger around, seemed to be trying to make conversation, and insisted on carrying the groceries out to the car.

“What is it,” asked Dr. Stidger. “I think you want to tell me something.”

“Yes,” said the man, “my boy is at Okinawa. He has been lonely, and so have we—his mother and I. This morning we received this message: ‘The War Department regrets to inform you that your son, Corporal David Jones, has been dangerously wounded.’”

Standing there on the sidewalk, beside the open door of his car, Dr. Stidger realized that

there are countless persons in this old world who are carrying loads that others might share. So give your sympathy without stopping to ask whether it is worth while to do so. It is too sacred a thing for any of us to tell what it is worth. God, from whom it comes, sends it through you to the man who stands in need. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

And you who are carrying cares—do not turn in upon yourselves. Let others share them with you. Let others help you to bear them. Do not think for a moment that you are imposing on friendship when you permit your friends to go with you into the Garden.

The other day I was in a home where there has been a lot of sickness and trouble. One of our Westminster families had been a tower of strength. The good man of the house was actually embarrassed when he told me of all that had been done for him. And this is what I said to him: "Why, my dear man, a true friend is always looking for an opportunity to help in time of trouble. Friendship **needs** such opportunities, if it is to be deep and strong. You are doing your friends a favor by letting them help you. They owe at least as much to you as you to them."

When the Garden of Gethsemane lies ahead, friends **can** go, **want** to go, and **do** go, a long way. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ"—which is not only the law of love and service, but the law of our own spiritual growth.

But friends cannot go all the way. Jesus wanted his friends near him, and their "standing by" meant much. But he had to go on farther alone. As Luke puts it: "He was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast." There is always that stone's throw distance between the heart in its bitterness and pain, and the nearest and dearest friend. There is an inner sanctuary of sorrow where even the wisest and most understanding cannot, and will not try, to come. When loving friends have done their best—have sat with us in silence; have pressed our hand and talked it through; have watched in prayer and mingled their tears with ours—the battle has still to be fought out in that lonely place—a stone's throw removed.

A father and mother saw their daughter happily married, and rejoiced with her in the birth of two beautiful children. But when the young husband was lost over Germany, they felt strangely helpless. "We did what we could, but we knew that in the last analysis she had to face her sorrow, and make her adjustments, alone. We could only watch, and wait, and pray."

Suffering, and conflict, and temptation, are always an individual thing, and therefore a lonely experience that cannot be completely shared. Jesus had to fight his battle in the garden alone. As the old hymn puts it:

"He suffered, bled, and died, alone."

Everyone who has lost a son, who faces an illness that cripples or can only end in death; everyone who must meet circumstances that

shatter life's dearest plans, is in that place "a stone's throw removed." In this sense "every man must bear his own burden."

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III

But there is One who can, and does, go all the way. Jesus went on, and he was alone as far as earthly comradeship was concerned. But who would affirm that in the hour of his extremity he was really alone?

There are two things about ~~Reinhold~~ famous paintings of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane that have often struck me. One is the angel hovering in the background. An illustrious preacher was once asked what Biblical character he would most have liked to be. He answered, "The angel that strengthened Jesus in the Garden." Perhaps we would feel like saying to him, as the Master once said to the mother of James and John: "Ye know not what ye ask." For the inclusion of that angel was the artist's way of saying, "God himself was there."

The other point about the painting is the great rock upon which Jesus is leaning. It is symbolic. The psalmist says, "When my heart is overwhelmed, thou wilt lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Jesus is here leaning on the Rock of Ages. He was not alone!

The biographer of Garibaldi tells how one night a soldier in the great liberator's army was brooding outside his tent in the moonlight. His earlier enthusiasm had faded. He was thinking of his wife and children at home. He was plan-

ning how he might desert. The great commander himself came by. In a glance he took in the situation. He seemed to read the thoughts that were doing battle in the soldier's mind. He put his hand on the man's shoulder and spoke just one word—"Courage."

My friends, in the hour of your extremity, when you feel like deserting your post and abandoning your faith, a GREATER than Garibaldi is at your side, and His one word is—"Courage."

Jesus was never utterly forsaken. For a few terrible moments on the Cross he thought he was. "My God, my God," he cried, "why hast thou forsaken me?" Don't be surprised, therefore, if you sometimes feel the same way. But remember that it was only a few minutes later that God's presence was so infinitely real to him, that he lifted his eyes to heaven, and in perfect confidence and peace, whispered, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Yes, God goes all the way.—

*"And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadows,
Keeping watch above his own."*

"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

"Every man must bear his own burden."

But now we must add a third text: "Cast thy burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain thee."